

# The Opportunities and Challenges of Partnering With Schools

Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis

Rossier School of Education

University of Southern California

## Executive Summary

While the benefits of partnerships between school and external groups are many (building social capital, enhancing educational reform, creating stronger communities, increasing academic achievements, and enhancing school performance), creating effective partnerships does not always come easily. One of the first decisions that organizations interested in partnering need to examine is the type of partnership they would like to form, as there are different strategies for engaging in collaborations versus cooperative arrangements. Partnerships that rely on each other to accomplish joint goals fall into the category of collaboration. Cooperative arrangements typically involve coordination in which the partners network and share information together.

The next major step for leaders who are helping to facilitate partnerships is to examine common challenges that might thwart their efforts: a lack of planning or trust, maintaining faith, understanding different organizational cultures, dissimilar goals, and poor communication. Each of these issues represents the major areas identified in the literature on failed partnerships.

Research on successful partnerships demonstrates that several practices can improve success:

- Develop clear, mutually derived, and attainable goals in a shared vision.
- Conduct intensive planning.
- Ensure leadership.
- Foster frequent, open, an ongoing communication.
- Develop clear policies and roles.
- Create clear decision-making processes.
- Designate funds, staff, materials, and time.
- Conduct evaluation.
- Create mutual relationships and trust.

In addition to following these practices, leaders should make sure that partnerships move through three and important phases: initiation, commitment, and institutionalization. Each of these stages requires the best practices to achieve success. For example, planning, communication, and trust building are particularly important during courtship. At the commitment phase, policy development and decision-making structures become important, while during institutionalization, evaluation should be emphasized. An awareness of challenges, best practices, and the stages of partnership will ensure success for organizations that are interested in working with schools.

## The Opportunities and Challenges of Partnering With Schools

Schools have a long history of partnering with community agencies, parent groups, government organizations, and other outside organizations. This trend intensified in the early 1990s as research demonstrated that such partnerships had important outcomes for schools, students, and communities (Ascher, 1988; Davis, 1996; Kirst, 1994; Lockwood, 1996). In particular, school to work, school linked programs (i.e. health, counseling, and other services offered within schools rather than outside them), early intervention for college, and college-secondary school programs grew in numbers in the 1990s, as a research-based intervention aimed at reaching more children and providing more effective and efficient services for them. (Brown, 2000; Hyman, 1995; Kirst, 1994; SHEEO, 2003). While common sense suggests that a partnership between a school and other organizations might be beneficial, research now supports this practice as a key element to student success and community enhancement.

Partnerships result in a host of outcomes including building social capital, enhancing educational reform, creating stronger communities, increasing academic achievements, and enhancing school performance (Kirst, 1994; Lockwood, 1996). When outside organizations partner with schools, they increase an education institution's social capital (Lockwood, 1996). For example, companies that partner to develop school-to-work programs typically assist educational institutions to become more aware of employment trends, enrich the school counselor's knowledge of vocational areas, and develop greater job placements. An exchange of information and increase in cultural capital sometimes result in fundamental changes in how services are provided (Kirst, 1994). Kirst found that social services modified their approaches to working with students based on new information obtained through close contact with the school. This process then led to more effective service delivery. Another way that partnerships enhance

schools is by helping to foster educational reform. For example, GEAR UP partnerships between colleges and schools were established to prepare at-risk students, who showed academic promise, for college. Although the program is not available to all students, it benefits the entire school by creating other significant changes such as promoting a college-going culture, providing additional information to counselors, and raising teacher expectations of students (Hyman, 1995; Lockwood, 1996). Other partnerships build stronger communities. When health agencies are located within schools, their services are more likely to be utilized by families. The overall health of the community is enhanced, not just that of the school's students. Lastly, research has demonstrated that a variety of school/community partnerships increase their selected students' academic achievement and also enhance overall school performance. Programs directly located in or linked with other schools appear to have a halo effect. (Ascher, 1988; Lockwood, 1996).

Though partnerships have many benefits, their effective creation does not always come easily. (Lockwood, 1996; Mattessich, Murray-Close, Monsey, 2001; Saxton, 1997; Teitel, 1991). Several of studies show the challenges and tensions that emerge when school systems partner with other organizations. In this paper, we will review research on how to work effectively with school systems. The paper's first part will examine two types of partnerships, representing different engagement levels, and the best practices for developing them. Next, we present research delineating the various challenges and tensions that emerge when establishing partnerships. This research facilitates partner awareness of potential pitfalls by noting areas that are likely to upset or destroy a partnership. Lastly, we focus on the best practices that have been identified in working with school systems.

The topic of this paper is particularly important to precollege outreach programs. Gandara (2001) noted that few precollege programs and schools worked together even though they have similar goals and the same mission. Precollege programs exist because the educational system does not meet the needs of all students. Yet systematic change does not occur because programs do not work with schools. More than likely, precollege programs will always be necessary unless communities and organizations recognize the necessity of working with schools.

### *Benefits for College Preparation*

Why should college preparation programs be interested in partnering with schools? Perhaps the most important reason is to help transform schools. Programs, such as GEAR UP, were started with this purpose in mind. Many critics observed that programs providing services for early intervention for college worked with schools in peripheral ways by sharing space, not expertise and knowledge. Early intervention programs, provided that they develop systematic partnerships, can be part of a broader reform of education by creating college-going cultures in schools. These types of partnerships involve early intervention staff and teachers who both share information, develop joint programs, and maintain responsibility for college going.

Another reason to collaborate with schools is to have a wider impact. Even if early intervention programs choose not to participate in educational reform or school transformation, many are interested in having a broader impact on a larger number of students who are in need. By partnering with schools, these programs can offer college information sessions to more students than just those who participate in early intervention programs. Moreover, programs can have a positive effect on the peers with whom students interact. This outcome increases the

chances that students will have similar aspirations, which has been shown to support college going.

Providing programs in schools also significantly improves an early intervention program's delivery of services. When offered at the school, these services are easier for students and parents to access, because transportation needs are reduced and logistics simplified. Students are more likely to stay in an early intervention program (thereby decreasing dropout), if the program is user friendly and does not create hardships when utilizing its services. Studies of school-linked programs show that students and parents appreciate one location for all services. In addition, if teachers and staff of early intervention programs are in contact, they can share information about student progress to design individualized assistance. Early intervention programs often spend much of their time trying to assess and understand student academic achievement levels. School personnel have a variety of tests and measures about student achievement that can inform early intervention programs. Another way that teachers and staff can be helpful is by providing consistent feedback to parents. Parents who are advised about their children's progress can effectively support them at home. In contrast, disjointed programs sometimes offer differing perspectives on student progress, which confuses parents and makes it difficult for them to assist their children appropriately. Linked programs provide consistent advice for student success. These are a few of the many advantages on which early intervention program can capitalize for schools.

Partnerships also maximize and often increase resources. Research demonstrates that in most partnerships the combined resources (both financial and human) are more than the two individual organizations would have alone (Smith & Wholstetter, 2004). Moreover, partnerships are often attractive to outside funders. Groups that work together are therefore more likely to

receive outside funding. Early intervention programs often struggle for resources. Even schools that are not well financed have important resources – such as facilities, test results, and staff – that can be shared with early intervention programs. Teachers and counselors can provide valuable information about the day-to-day activities of students – knowledge that would need to be duplicated if it were not available to early intervention programs. Also, these programs and schools can exchange expertise that can increase their respective values. The school may have data that can support early intervention programs, while the school's college preparation programs may have materials about college going. Also each partner has different networks and contacts that can be mutually beneficial.

### *Collaboration or Cooperation?*

One of the first decisions that organizations interested in partnering need to consider is the type of partnership that they might form. Partnerships involving joint goals and a reliance on each other to accomplish fall into the category of collaboration. Collaborators try to align goals and identify an identical mission, such as preparing children for college. They then try to work at a more fundamental level, which entails joint planning and power sharing. Cooperative arrangements typically require coordination in each partner's network and information sharing between partners (Hagadoorn, 1993; Lockwood, 1996; McCants, 2004). While much of the literature suggests that partnerships should be collaborative, few existing programs actually meet this designation. For example, most school-linked and early intervention for college programs are cooperative efforts in that they have less systematic involvement. The school and partnering organization usually have independent goals yet better achieve them through a coordinated approach. One of the difficulties in understanding research on partnerships is that few actually define their levels of interaction (McCants, 2004). In addition, there has been no research



comparing collaboration versus cooperation to understand whether one approach or the other better achieves goals and has an impact on students. Thus it is unclear why advocates commonly suggest collaboration is “better” or more desirable than coordination (Lockwood, 1996).

More concrete examples of coordination and collaboration might be helpful for understanding these concepts. Examples of the coordinated approach include inviting precollege outreach programs and support services to participate in college fairs at school; compiling a list of college outreach programs available to students in the school that is disseminated to teachers and guidance counselors; and welcoming outreach programs to use school facilities for tutoring, classroom instruction, and other activities. Collaboration between outreach programs and schools might involve assembling a team of teachers, counselors, and administrators to work together with local outreach programs to increase college preparation and access; developing a college access team; and creating a collective vision with short-term and long-term goals and a plan of action; or gathering information and assembling resources in order to obtain collaborative grants (McCants, 2004). As noted earlier, most school partnerships are cooperative efforts. Research-related ways to enhance coordination is best used to understand how to improve working relationships.

While partnerships are uncommon, three examples are reviewed to illustrate how schools and early intervention programs might work together (McCants, 2004).<sup>1</sup> We provide these examples to concretize the notion of a partnership. However, it should be noted that these are not definitive models, because research on the effectiveness of partnering has not been conducted. The first example is Talent Search, which is part of the federal TRIO Program that focuses on middle school students. Talent Search works with an afterschool program in three schools in the Harlem area. It also provides academic and advising services to students at the high school level.

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<sup>1</sup> This section on partnerships borrows heavily from McCants, 2004 who provided a summary of these programs.

The main components of the program include after school workshops and tutoring and meetings with counselors twice a week. The program works very closely with the school and opens its workshops to all parents and students. Moreover, it participates in special school fairs to disseminate information to students and families more broadly. Lastly, Talent Search counselors work with parent coordinators to provide information about college access that is distributed to families.

Another example is College Summit -- a private nonprofit organization that provides college application assistance, essay writing guidance, one-on-one college counseling, and peer leadership training for low-income high school students. College summit employees help train high school teachers to serve as college advisers for their homerooms. They also help schools implement postsecondary planning periods. In addition, college summit staff work with local colleges to help increase low-income student enrollment in their districts.

Lastly, Urban Scholars, a year-round program at the University of Massachusetts – Boston features advanced afterschool classes, seminars, tutoring, and supervised study for gifted and talented middle and high school students. They provide training for teachers and administrators on developing the best college preparation curriculum and disseminate self-help books to schools on the MCAS Math Test, an exam created by Urban Scholars, in middle schools. The program's staff work with high school students to organize an annual academic themed conference that all students in the school can attend. Most of these partnerships are based on coordination – exchange of information or expansion of involvement in an activity – rather than collaboration. While both are desirable, many critics believe that systematic change within the schools will not happen without collaboration (Gandara, 2001; SHEEO, 2003).

Each example illustrates the usefulness of collaborative partnerships between schools and programmatic efforts. Following challenges in implementing partnerships, we provide a list below of best practices that are derived from these programs and the general literature on partnerships. Because most studies do not designate whether the effort was cooperative or collaborative, the research lessons below cannot be designated best practices based on these categories. In some cases, a differentiation was made in the research, and a specific best practice for collaboration is noted. This information is summarized in chart 1.

Early intervention programs can benefit by examining several components typical of originating partnerships. For example, partnerships can have formal agreements characterized by a memorandum of understanding, contracts, or other legally binding documents, or they can be informal with both organizations acting in good faith under unspoken agreements. Partners should also examine the necessary depth of the partnership. Smith and Wholstetter (2004) suggest that there are two types of involvement: one-level and multilevel. One-level involvement engages one level of employees (teachers or counselors working within early intervention program), is episodic, and does not significantly involve school leaders. Multilevel involvement includes multiple members of the school, regularly engages the partners, and significantly involves school leaders. Whether informal or formal, one-level or multilevel, the partnership's contents are important to consider as it is being developed. Partners should think about what resources – financial, human, physical, and organizational – might be exchanged and how sharing would benefit both organizations.

### *Challenges and Tensions in Partnering*

While creating partnerships and working with schools have many benefits, these processes can be fraught with challenges. In this section, we cite some of the most commonly

identified ones. By becoming aware of these challenges, leaders may overcome them more easily. In the next section, we offer advice for addressing and breaking these barriers. Details about effective resolutions are described immediately afterward in the part titled “Best practices in partnering.”

*Lack of planning.* One of the most cited challenges in creating partnerships between schools and other organizations is the level of planning and background work that is done before engaging in any activity (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Pugach & Lawrence, 2002; Teitel, 1991; Whetten, 1981). In a study of GEAR UP Programs, it was found that one of the main barriers to success was time. The partnerships felt that they were hurried into beginning activity before they had a chance to establish trust, mutual understanding, clearer goals, or an identifiable plan for moving forward (Teitel, 1991). The opportunity to partner with other organizations often emerges organically, and an opportunity is created. There are pressures for the partnership to get off the ground quickly and to demonstrate progress. A plethora of studies conducted on school partnerships has demonstrated that a lack of planning between school and college preparation program leadership is one of the primary reasons for failure. (Ascher, 1988; Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz., Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Pugach & Lawrence, 2002 ). Initial planning will take longer in most collaborative arrangements rather than in cooperative ones. Merely ensuring planning does not suffice since the planning phase, itself, is fraught with many challenges including: maintaining faith, understanding the other organization’s culture, creating similar goals, and building trust.

*Maintaining faith.* A second commonly cited challenge is the attitude toward initial difficulty (Davis, 1996; Oliver, 1990). Members of the partnership lose faith in the project’s efficacy and often begin to devote less effort and time, believing that the partnership will soon

fall apart. This phenomenon becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and at that point, many partnerships cease (Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Teitel, 1991). Research has shown that once members begin to lose faith, they start to frame the organizational problem in such a way that cooperation or collaboration does not appear to be a useful solution. While it might seem naïve to say, “keep the faith,” this is particularly important at the beginning of partnerships, because once people sense that others have lost commitment, they also lose commitment (Teitel, 1991). This is an even more significant problem with collaborations since they require a deeper commitment.

*Understanding different organizational cultures.* There are a variety of reasons that initial work is often bumpy. One of the most cited reasons is differing organizational cultures that represent distinct systems and approaches to working together (Davis, 1996; Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz., Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Tjosvold & Tsao, 1989). For example, a social service agency might believe that parents should be an instrumental part of counseling a student, while the school might feel that parents should not be included. If these dissimilar assumptions are not identified and discussed openly, they may lead partners to believe that they have separate goals. Examining how a common aim can be reached by diverse approaches and perhaps developing a compromise are important steps toward creating successful partnerships (Lockwood, 1996). A history of poor group interaction between the partners can exacerbate these misunderstandings and erect higher barriers that need to be addressed and overcome before the partnership can move forward successfully (Davis, 1996; Teitel, 1991; Lockwood, 1996). Negotiating different organizational cultures appears to affect both cooperative and collaborative partnerships. However, when groups plan together and share

power, they require a deeper understanding of each other. Working with differences becomes a more significant issue.

*Differing goals.* Another reason that partnerships experience difficulty early on is that partners may have different expectations and goals (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Kirst, 1994; Lockwood, 1996; Whetten, 1981). A study conducted by the Annie Casey Foundation of five cities partnerships to help disadvantaged youth found that differing expectations and goals were primary factors in problems faced by partnerships (Lockwood, 1996). The study also revealed that conducting a detailed needs assessment at the beginning of the partnership can alleviate this concern by providing detailed data about the partnership's direction. Both coordinated and collaborative efforts are affected by differing goals and expectations.

*Lacking trust.* Perhaps the most prevalent finding in the research for why partnerships fail is a breakdown in trust. One (or both) of the partners begins to doubt the other. (Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz., Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Haskins, Liedtka, & Rosenblum, 1998; Lockwood, 1991). Once this begins, partners are reluctant to share information and work in cooperative ways. The Casey Foundation study (1995) noted a lack of trust as one of the major challenges to collaboration and cited several possible causes including: communication gaps, poor history between the groups, historical isolation of parties from one another, inadequate time up front to develop relationships, top-down governance that does not seek input from the other partner, or the apparent lack of mutuality. In a study of school-college collaborations (Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988), the researchers describe the role that trust plays: "No one predicted that so many pent-up fears and doubts due to previous experiences would have to be overcome before the intended collaborative work could even begin" (p139). This pattern was found in every partnership studied. Trust is more important in collaborative arrangements, since

the partners feel that more is at stake because their goals and mission are linked. In contrast, a lack of trust may not affect coordinated efforts in the same fashion. They may continue and not experience the same level of threat to their existence.

*Poor communication.* Lastly, research has identified that communication between and among parties is essential at every stage of the partnership. Poor communication or gaps in it often results in failure and dissolution of the partnership (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Casey, 1995; Lockwood, 1996; Oliver, 1990). Researchers note that an absence of communication hinders a partnership's evolution and the important informal networking that creates leadership, builds commitment, and energizes partners (Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988). Communication is noted to be even more significant among collaborators because meeting joint goals requires greater mutual understanding than information sharing (Bridges & Husbands, 1996). If partners can overcome the challenges of creating joint goals, understanding each others' organizational cultures, trusting each other, and other important aspects of the partnership's initial phases, then they need mainly to focus on communication. Studies of failed collaboration demonstrate that communication is the key to keeping one in place and surmounting future barriers (Googins & Richlin, 2000). Specific best practices for collaboration will be described in the next section.

### *Best Practices in Partnering*

How can college preparation programs effectively partner with schools? We address this question in this section. Research suggests evidence for some clear best practices that partnerships can strive to implement and that can make a measurable difference in working together.

*Develop clear, mutually derived, and attainable goals and a shared vision.* Partnerships are facilitated by creating clear expectations and goals. This is particularly important among

collaborative efforts (Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Davis, 1996; Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz., Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Googins & Richlin, 2000; Greenberg, 1992; Lockwood, 1996; Mattessich, & Murray-Close, 2001; Nichols & Kayongo, 2003; Whetten, 1981). Many studies suggest that it is important to begin with a needs assessment. For example, a school collaborating with another organization on college preparation should try to determine jointly through a needs assessment what the particular problems are (no college going curriculum, substance abuse, lack of expectations about college going) and how the organizations or groups can best work together to define solutions. While a needs assessment is one approach, other strategies can work as well. Ultimately, leaders need to decide an approach for moving towards clear, mutually developed goals. Partnerships may not succeed unless the organizations jointly agree on the nature of and ways to solve the problem and create goals related to its resolution. Often groups assume that they have similar goals (e.g., preparing children for college). However a community's specific problems and their solutions are often very different than what may be taken for granted, and the partnering organizations continue to believe that they see the situation similarly. Conducting a needs assessment is a way of getting beyond the assumptions of each group and making joint goals based on data. In addition, the partners need to be convinced that working together is the best way to meet their identified objectives. For example, some college preparation programs consider mentoring the key to student success, while school systems focus on writing instead. If they decide to work together on a program to increase rates of college going, their efforts may be thwarted if they do not first discuss their differing visions.

After mutually developing clear goals, the organizations should examine their resources, decide if the goals are attainable, and determine how each can contribute. Through this process, expectations about the work of each partner should be formally discussed and put into writing.



Clear expectations of each other is just as important as clear goals. As a result of needs assessment and the development of mutual goals, a shared vision is typically created. However, several researchers suggest that after finishing a needs assessment and statement of goals, partnering organizations might draft a statement of expectations of each partner and a formal vision statement to guide the partnership. Both documents can be included in a memorandum of understanding. While these practices are particularly important for collaborative initiatives, they have been shown to be beneficial to cooperative efforts (Davis, 1996; Googins & Richlin, 2000).

*Conduct intensive planning.* While the needs assessment, development of clear and mutual goals, and a shared vision are the beginning of intensive planning, partnerships – particularly collaborations – require an even longer planning phase. This phase should move beyond a shared vision and goals to an implementation plan that outlines how the organizations can best work together to reach their objectives (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Davis, 1996; Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz., Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Googins & Richlin, 2000; Greenberg, 1992; Mattessich, & Murray-Close, 2001; Oliver, 1990; Stillman & Schriver, 2000). One of the implementation plan's elements should be a feasibility study that determines any additional costs to conduct the partnership's work. Another best practice is the availability of appropriate funds and human resources for supporting the partnership. A feasibility study can help partners to ensure that these are provided later. In addition, many researchers suggest a formal memorandum of understanding that designates the partnership's expectations, shared vision, governing arrangements, roles, and financial commitments. While this may sound like a tremendous amount of work, this process saves time in the long run since it avoids planning problems that could occupy staff time. In addition, creating a shared vision and implementation

plan does not cost money, which is often a concern among college preparation programs and schools.

Intensive planning serves several important goals other than producing an implementation plan. The extended planning time helps the organizations to understand each other's cultures, develop trust, and learn to work together – barriers that we discussed earlier. For example, schools are often highly bureaucratic, while their partner organizations are usually smaller and more entrepreneurial. For the collaboration to be successful in the long term, each organization needs to understand and navigate the other's culture. Intensive planning is particularly important when working with disaffected groups that feel let down by communities, because more time is needed to develop trust and understanding (Lockwood, 1996). For example, schools that have rarely received external help often perceive the college preparation program as critiquing their efforts at creating a college-going culture. During the planning phase, the college preparation program can assure the school that it is helping to build the school's capacity, rather than suggesting that the school is doing inadequate work.

*Ensure leadership/convener.* Successful partnerships often create a new position or designate a person within to serve as a liaison or convener (Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Googins & Richlin, 2000; Lockwood, 1996; Nichols & Kayongo, 2003; Wood & Gray, 1991 ). While it does not have to be a new position or specifically designated person, this figure should take responsibility for monitoring the collaboration, maintaining communication, building positive group dynamics, resolving conflicts, ensuring that barriers are overcome, and creating facilitators for moving the partnership forward. Some research suggests that the convener needs to be a person who has legitimacy with both organizations and has the ability to influence and guide the partnership. Legitimate leaders are more able to persuade stakeholders to participate, remain

responsive, and involved. Therefore partnering organizations are much more successful if they can find an individual who has legitimacy, is seen as unbiased, understands the shared vision, provides motivation, and can induce involvement (Wood & Gray, 1991).

Many partnerships begin with great enthusiasm. During the initial planning phase, both organizations are deeply committed, but over time, other priorities occupy their attention. If there are not designated leaders or liaisons, then the partnership experiences strain over time. One pitfall of choosing a convener is that the project becomes the property or responsibility of that one person (for example, a principal), as opposed to the teachers and staff, and this can also strain the partnership. A convener is important for the ongoing work of collaborative partnerships, but particularly so at the beginning of cooperative partnerships to convince individuals to engage in the activity (Wood & Gray, 1991). Schools are often guided by routine behaviors, and working with a college preparation program disrupts the routine that teachers and staff have established. A leader, such as the principal, who describes the importance of partnering with the college preparation program at its inception is key to success.

*Create frequent, open, and ongoing communication.* Partnerships are sustained through communication. As noted earlier, communication gaps (i.e., not enough communication) or poor communication (i.e., hostile, vague) are noted as the most frequent reasons for partnerships to fail (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Davis, 1996; Haskins, Liedtka, & Rosenblum, 1998; Lockwood, 1996; Mattessich, & Murray-Close, 2001; Nichols & Kayongo, 2003; Saxton, 1997). One solution to these problems is to develop a communications plan as part of the partnership's initial implementation plan. A communication plan designates different vehicles of communication (e.g. newsletters, e-mail updates, group meetings), frequency, and goals (updates on work, sharing of challenges, revisions based on feedback). An example of how a communication plan

effectively works is an early intervention program that shares test preparation workshop dates with the school, which provides schools with sufficient lead time to advertise and promote information about the program. Studies demonstrate that partnerships between schools and college preparation programs often do not meet their goals because partners are unaware of each others' activity. In addition, the communications plan should be evaluated and revised each year. While formal communication built into a communications plan is important, informal communication is just as significant. This is often where honest exchange occurs and problems are identified. The leader/convener often plays a key role in communication, informally checking in with various members of the partnership. While informal communication is too hard to plan or necessarily provide advice on, successful partnerships note it as one of the key factors that organizations need to consider (Googins & Richlin, 2000).

*Develop clear policies and roles.* After the planning phase and once the partnership is in process, organizations need to ensure that there are clear policies and that individuals understand their roles (Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Greenberg, 1992; Lockwood, 1996; Mattessich, & Murray-Close, 2001; Nichols & Kayongo, 2003; Wood & Gray, 1991). One way to make certain staff are better informed is to include them in the planning phase (and within on-going policy development) at strategic intervals. An example of this practice is an advisory board for a college preparation program that is composed of select counselors, teachers, and a few key administrators and that meets a few times a year. The more people who are involved in the initial planning and goal setting, the more likely that individuals within the organization will be able to effectively enact their roles. It is not uncommon for collaborations to become derailed when leaders move on to take the next challenge, and staff remain unclear about their roles in the partnership. Because partnerships may create situations that are outside existing policy, they

require an examination of policy to determine where new development is needed. Having policies in place also helps if there is turnover so that new staff understand their roles in the partnership. While establishing clear policies may seem commonsensical, research on less successful partnerships demonstrates that many organizations forget to re-examine policy to establish clear guidelines to guide their work (Davis, 1996; Mattessich, & Murray-Close, 2001). For example, once a partnership had developed, schools find that they may need to alter policies about room availability. If the partnering organization keeps calling and is told that space is unavailable, they will become frustrated, which in turn will affect the partnership's overall success and momentum.

*Develop clear decision-making processes.* In order for collaborating organizations to work together, they require mechanisms for joint decision-making. (This practice is not as important for coordinated efforts.) (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Davis, 1996; Mattessich, & Murray-Close, 2001; Nichols, & Kayongo-Male, 2003; Stillman & Schriwar, 2000). Trust is often lost in collaborative efforts when decision-making processes appear not to be mutual, decisions appear to be capricious, inappropriate people appear to be making decisions, or one partner waits an inordinate amount of time for decisions to be made. Because trust is one of the main reasons that partnerships fail, and trust is often lost through ambiguous decision-making processes, it is particularly important that partners spend time examining their decision-making processes. They need to ask themselves questions such as: do our decision-making processes allow our partners to have input? Do we communicate our decision-making process to our partners including our rationale? Are the right people included in the decision-making process? Do we communicate why these are the people making decisions to our partners? Do we prioritize decision-making that relate to our partnership? Do we make decisions on a timely basis? Do our

partners understand how we make decisions? Partners need to ensure clear paths, appropriate timing, and the right people, and they need to demonstrate the ability to compromise and be adaptable. The organization often must examine skills among key members of the collaboration including conflict resolution, negotiation, coalition and alliance development, and listening. On one hand, decision-making processes are sites where power sharing can be demonstrated, and on the other, where power differentials can emerge. Leaders should carefully watch decision-making processes to guarantee that certain members are not exerting power in inappropriate ways. Decision-making processes also reflect the partners' respect for each other. In many ways, they are pivotal for fostering trust, mutual respect, and empowerment (Davis, 1996; Lockwood, 1996). These structures will likely need to be altered as the partnership matures, so partners must guard against seeing governance as static and realize it should evolve to fit the partnership's growth (Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988).

*Designate funds, staff, materials, and time.* Intensive planning, a shared vision, good communication, and clear decision-making processes will still be thwarted if partnerships are not provided with sufficient funds to support the activity and skilled staff with enough time to work on the partnership (Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Davis, 1996; Greenberg, 1992; Mattessich, & Murray-Close, 2001; Nichols, & Kayongo-Male, 2003). Partners often struggle to redirect funds as internal politics make it difficult to shift funding from existing priorities. Politics can emerge at this stage, and powerful individuals/groups can destroy a partnership, especially if they feel that their resources are threatened. For example, teachers may feel that professional development funds, once allocated to them directly and used based on their priorities, are being inappropriately redirected toward hiring early intervention staff to teach them about creating a

college-going culture. Shifts in funding priority need to be delicately handled by the convener, who has establish legitimacy.

Partnerships may require individuals with different skills than those currently within the organization. Because many organizations are strapped for resources, they often try to elevate an individual without the appropriate skills to a partnership role. For example, an early intervention program decides to partner with the school on providing outreach to parents. While the school has personnel who have worked with parents, the early intervention program might not have staff who are similarly experienced. Consequently, the organization struggles in this new activity of working with parents. While organizations allocate time to their mission oriented work, partnerships are often perceived as falling outside of the mission and as a task to be done “on additional time.” As one would imagine, no such time ever presents itself, and the partnership withers from lack of attention. Funding, staffing, and time are essential to both collaboration and cooperative efforts. However, collaboration is more likely to involve joint funding and staffing that alters the workplace than cooperative efforts.

*Conduct evaluation.* Evaluation is essential to maintaining partnerships and serves a variety of important purposes (Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Davis, 1996; Greenberg, 1992; Oliver, 1990). First, partners will not understand if they are closer to achieving their goals unless they conduct ongoing evaluations. Partnerships are often difficult and laborious to maintain. Without evidence of the partnership’s impact, it is often difficult to keep both organizations involved and to maintain momentum. While evaluations may not always show success, they can identify problem areas that partners can address allowing them to get closer to meeting their goals. Second, evaluations help identify whether staff understand their roles, if policies are clear, communication is working, and appropriate resources are available for the partnership. It is

important that the evaluations be as inclusive as possible in order to obtain the necessary feedback to improve the partnership. While leaders can try to track and monitor the partnership to ensure that processes are working smoothly, most partnerships have found that without a formal evaluation some information falls through the cracks and ends up creating problems for the partnering organizations. There are several surveys and instruments that have been developed to evaluate the process of partnership development, and many are available online (Wilder, 2002). Evaluations related to the outcome of the partnerships are usually customized to the project, but many existing evaluations could be used as templates for developing an outcome evaluation (Greenberg, 1992).

*Create mutual relationship and trust.* Many of the practices above work to create mutual relationships particularly the development of a shared vision, clear decision-making processes, and ongoing communication (Haskins, Liedtka, & Rosenblum, 1998). Yet successful partnerships between schools and college preparation programs do not just leave relationship building to these bureaucratic processes. Instead, they recognize that developing a successful partnership requires people who can work together well. Several practices helped them to build relationships intentionally (Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Brown, 2000; Davis, 1996; Doz, 1996; Lockwood, 1996; Mattessich, & Murray-Close, 2001; Nichols, & Kayongo-Male, 2003). First, they often engage staff in training and development related to skills that are required to partner fully (many of which have already been mentioned such as listening, negotiation, conflict resolution, etc.). Organizations also create regular, informal check-in times over lunch or dinner. Another way of supporting the partnership is to develop community support. When tensions rise between partners due to misunderstandings, an outside supporter in the community can help remind partners of the importance of working together and provide common ground. Oftentimes,



successful partnerships strategically seek and obtain community support and several advocates who can play this role when needed (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz., Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Lockwood, 1996; Greenberg, 1992).

Each practice – communication, planning, etc. – above works to create trust and relationship building. Another one is partners learning how to talk about racial, ethnic, and economic inequalities and their causes with candor and incorporating those discussions into their partnership development process. (This practice is more important for collaborative efforts and potentially not necessary for cooperative ones). Schools and community groups routinely face these issues, but partners may have different ways of thinking about and approaching them. This relates to understanding the partnering organizations’ cultures with a specific focus on issues related to inequalities. Study after study demonstrates that if these inequalities cannot be discussed openly, trust may not develop or may take much longer to build (Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, and Goss, 2004; Lockwood, 1996; Nichols, & Kayongo-Male, 2003). Often an outside facilitator can help to ensure that the two groups begin to speak a common language around inequalities and to understand each other. Being attentive to relationship development, typically unfolding in various stages or phases over time, is one of the most important ways to develop trust and is described in the next section.

### *Partnership Stages*

Research suggests that there are several stages school and precollege programs will go through when they engage in partnerships (Davis, 1996; Greenberg, 1992; Lockwood, 1996; Teitel, 1991; Whetten, 1981; Wholstetter, Smith, Malloy, 2005). In order for the partnership to be successful, leaders should be mindful of the stages and facilitate movement from one stage to the next. Leaders also need to pace the partnership’s forward movement, particularly ensuring that

enough time is spent in the initial planning phase. The stages are important for collaborative efforts like GEAR UP, where the school and college preparation program worked closely together toward the shared goal of creating a college-going culture. The stages are not particularly important for cooperative efforts such as those described by College Summit, Talent Search, or the Urban Scholars Program. Cooperative efforts will likely have a short initiation or perhaps none at all, move directly to commitment, may never be truly institutionalized, and happen on the schools' periphery. These stages are offered for college preparation programs that wish to develop collaborative efforts, institutionalized practices, and deepen their interaction.

As suggested under the best practices, an extended initial planning phase in which partners conduct a needs assessment, create formal agreements, and define roles and responsibilities is important to build trust and relationships, particularly if there is a poor history of collaboration, no history between the parties, or a perceived lack of cooperation by schools or the partnering organization (Brown, 2000; Davis, 1996; Lockwood, 1996). Many partnerships never get off the ground because they try to rush through this phase (Teitel, 1991). During it, the partners examine each other for adaptability, communication skills, mutuality in the relationship, and other important information that they feel will be significant to the venture (Doz, 1996). Research demonstrates that partnerships that rushed through this phase usually end up with problems as they progress (Teitel, 1991). Also, partners need to weigh the benefits and cost of partnerships. Rushing in too quickly can be problematic. Both parties need to make certain that this is the right decision as it will require redirecting resources, time, and effort. There are several issues that partners should consider in a cost/benefit analysis:

- Presence of sufficient, qualified staff for shared effort
- Level of leadership from the partnering organizations

- Assessment of prior partnering experiences
- Analysis of opportunity costs – Is this the right partner?
- Loss of organizational identity and privacy
- Bureaucracy or irritation factor
- Growth – How does the proposed partnership build capacity for each organization?

(For the complete list and a more detailed discussion, please see Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, and Goss, 2004).

The research on interorganizational development suggests several steps that occur in this initial phase – establishment of mutual trust, identification of common interests, shared vision, and understanding the partner – have a significant impact on the partnership’s later institutionalization. Kanter (1994) has referred to this phase as “courtship,” and it is where trust building occurs. Several researchers note that trust building is particularly important among disaffected communities that have often experienced troubled partnerships and interactions with other groups. Research also suggests that having a champion who steers the organizations through the initiation process and convenes the initial meeting of the partners is crucial for moving through the initiation stage.

*Commitment.* After the initial phase of extended planning, the organizations make a commitment (formal agreements such as a memorandum of understanding are suggested to make certain that expectations are clear) to the partnership and begin to work together. It is in this phase that learning becomes particularly important (Haskins, Liedtka, & Rosenblum, 1998; Saxton, 1997). In order for the partnership to be successful, each partner must learn new ways to work together-- sharing spaces, exchanging information, understanding goals, and engaging different communication styles (Kirst, 1994; Lockwood, 1996). Leaders can also facilitate

learning by checking in with staff to troubleshoot issues as they emerge. For example, if an early intervention program contacts a school for information they typically do not generate, staff might simply resist accommodating the request. Leaders need to be involved in early interactions and ensure that staff examine whether they can produce the data even if they have not done so in the past. Policy development is critical in this phase for furthering the partnership and solidifying the manner in which people will work together. As earlier noted, a clear governance structure and explicit decision-making processes provide a forum for stakeholders to come together. In addition, communication is significant for maintaining commitment, building the relationship, and making initial decisions that partners both believe are effective.

*Institutionalized partnership.* The last phase of a partnership is the practice's institutionalization (Doz, 1996; Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz., Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Oliver, 1990). In order to reach this stage, Doz (1996) suggests that learning is again important. At this phase, the evaluation and monitoring of the partnership is critical for making adjustments in communication patterns, governance arrangements, and other ongoing structures that enable the collaboration to be successful. Doz found that successfully institutionalized partnerships regularly conduct an ongoing evaluation and use this data to make changes as needed. At this stage the convener/leader should also be watchful of the allocation of appropriate funds, both monetary and staffing, and ensure the appropriate materials and time that are required to keep the partnership thriving (Oliver, 1990). The third phase is often referred to as the evaluation phase. Without an ongoing evaluation and the identification of areas for improvement, partnerships become strained and are not sustained.

## Conclusion

The recent research on both failed and successful partnerships between schools and outside organization provides valuable insights to assist future groups in their efforts to work together. While many school and community partnerships struggled in the 1990s, they now have valuable information to guide their future efforts. Among the lessons learned, one is the importance of understanding the desired type of partnership. Whether a collaboration or a cooperative effort, each has benefits and can be navigated in slightly different ways. Another important lesson is being aware of the barriers and challenges that plague failed collaborations, so that the partnership avoids these pitfalls. In addition, a set of best practices have emerged that can help the organization to avoid these challenges or assist it to deal with them once they emerge. Lastly, research has demonstrated that collaborations progress in relatively predictable stages and that leaders who know these stages can guide their organizations through them.

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Chart 1- Comparison of best practices between cooperative and collaborative partnerships

Best practice	Cooperation	Collaboration
Clear, mutual, and attainable goal	Clear goals are important, but mutual and attainable goals are less so	Clear, mutual, and attainable goals are all important
Shared vision	Not necessarily needed	Essential
Intensive planning	Essential	Essential
Leader/convener	Important in the initial phase	Important throughout the partnership
Frequent, open, and ongoing communication	Essential in all phases	Essential in all phases
Clear policies and roles	Essential	Essential
Clear decision-making processes	Not necessarily needed	Essential
Funding, staff, materials, and time	Essential	Essential
Evaluation	Essential	Essential
Mutual relationships and trust	Not as pivotal	Essential

## About Us

The Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis (CHEPA) brings a multidisciplinary perspective to complex social, political, and economic issues in higher education. Located within the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, the Center's director is William G. Tierney. Adrianna J. Kezar is the Associate Director. Conducting theoretically informed research with real-world applicability, the Center has a broad focus on three areas of higher education—improving urban postsecondary education, strengthening school-university partnerships, and understanding international education.

The goal of the Center is to provide analysis of significant issues to support efforts to improve postsecondary education. Such issues intersect many boundaries. The Center is currently engaged in research projects regarding effective postsecondary governance, emerging organizational forms such as for-profit institutions, financial aid and access for students of color, successful college outreach programs, the educational trajectories of community college students, and retention of doctoral students of color.

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Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis  
Rossier School of Education  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, CA 90089-4037

T.213.740.7218

F.213.740.3889

E. [cheap@usc.edu](mailto:cheap@usc.edu)

[www.usc.edu/dept/cheap/](http://www.usc.edu/dept/cheap/)